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Testimony: An Act Expanding Economic Opportunity in Licensed Occupations

**General Law Committee
March 5, 2020**

Good afternoon Chairmen D'Agostino and Maroney, Ranking Members Witkos, and Cheeseman and members of the General Law Committee. My name is Christopher Fryxell and I am the President of the Associated Builders and Contractors of Connecticut (CT ABC). CT ABC is a statewide trade association of over 200 companies that represent merit shop contractors. I am testifying today on behalf of those members and as a member of the Apprentice, Journeyman and Contractor working group established by PA 17-76.

We appreciate the focus that Governor Lamont and his administration has put on workforce development and applaud efforts contained in this bill to increase training and career opportunities for residents of Connecticut. The construction industry, in particular, is facing a massive shortage of skilled craftspeople. Estimates suggest there are currently between 300,000 and 500,000 open jobs in the construction industry across the country. The demand for skilled labor will increase exponentially over the next few years as we are failing to replenish our aging workforce with young skilled workers.

This is a big problem with complicated solutions; however, one of the things discouraging young people from entering the construction industry in Connecticut is the arbitrary hiring ratio that the state imposes upon six specific trades: electrical, plumbing, heating, piping and cooling, sprinkler fitter and sheet metal. There are no other industries or trades that are hampered by such a barrier to entry for individuals exploring a career in a chosen trade. Dozens of proposals are introduced each year to encourage and expand apprenticeship and yet the hiring ratio persists.

Currently there is a jobsite ratio of one journeyperson to one apprentice, which exists to ensure safety and proper training environments while work is in progress. We agree with the 1:1 jobsite ratio for those reasons; however, its very existence obviates the need for a mismatched hiring ratio and dispels the myth perpetrated by those who oppose changes to hiring ratio that such changes will affect jobsite safety.

To be clear- we believe the hiring ratio should be changed to 1:1 across the board to match the current jobsite ratio. Doing so will remove a barrier that the state unnecessarily places between employers and potential employees in the construction industry.

That being said we agree with the intent of sections 2 and 3 of the bill which seek to make incremental improvements to the discriminatory hiring ratio as it currently exists;

although, edits are needed. As currently written, the language appears to allow contractors the ability to hire one additional last-year apprentice. But these individuals are likely gainfully employed and presently working in their trade so the current language may simply incentivize the poaching of last-year apprentices from competitors while failing to achieve the goal of encouraging workforce development. Instead, we suggest a change so that last-year apprentices are exempted for the purposes of the hiring ratio therefore allowing an additional apprentice to be hired for each last-year apprentice employed by a contractor. This will provide some relief from hiring ratio while also encouraging the completion of apprenticeship training.

Section 4 of the proposal seeks to encourage the use of distance and online learning for training and continuing education. This section is overly broad as it indiscriminately encompasses a wide variety of professions and industries. Some of the required training in the construction industry may be suitable for online coursework (OSHA training, for example, is currently available online) while other work, specifically aspects of apprenticeship training, are unlikely to be completed satisfactorily in an online-only program. We urge the committee to ensure the proper industry-specific stakeholders and experts have sufficient input when determining whether or not online and/or distance training is able to adequately satisfy the integrity, safety and curriculum needs of a specific industry.

Section 8 of the bill expands license reciprocity for skilled professionals who establish Connecticut residence. Again, we support the intent with some reservations. Current statute allows for reciprocity if such other state accepts the reciprocity of Connecticut licenses. This requirement is probably not a useful indicator of an individual's skill or ability. Further discussions may be needed in order to ensure that the Department of Consumer Protection and the appropriate trade-specific examining boards have sufficient oversight as to the ability and skill level of the individual as well as to ensure the public safety needs are met by those individuals seeking the license in Connecticut.

We appreciate the work the administration and this committee have done to advance the goals of economic and workforce development. I thank you for your time and consideration and I am happy to answer any questions. For follow up I can be reached at 860-838-6226 or chrisf@ctabc.org.